

MUSLIM STUDENTS OBSERVE RAMADAN AWAY FROM HOME

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WASHINGTON, SEPTEMBER 20-- Maher Ali, 19, is a freshman at Georgetown University in Washington, and it is the first time he is observing Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of reflection and fasting, on his own.

Ali has been at Georgetown for only two weeks, and he knows few students and even fewer Muslims at school. He is away from his home in Bahrain and the support of his parents, siblings and community. Yet on the first day of Ramadan, which began on September 13, Ali observed the fast.

"It was a long day," Ali told USINFO at the festive iftar (the evening meal at which the fast is broken) at Georgetown on September 13. Ali had not meant to, but he slept through suhoor, the early morning meal Muslims are permitted to eat before sunrise.

During the month of Ramadan, which this year ends on October 13, Muslims refrain from eating or drinking during daylight hours and break their fast at nightly iftars at sunset.

Imam Yahya Hendi, Georgetown's Muslim chaplain for the past eight years, told USINFO that the initial days of Ramadan are the most difficult for the 450 Muslim students on campus. For the younger students, who are used to the food cooked by their mothers and the support of their siblings, the early days require some adjustment, especially if their non-Muslim roommates know little about Ramadan.

"Georgetown makes Muslims feel at home," Hendi said. His wife, Siron, and the couple's young children joined Hendi at the first iftar. "I encourage my husband to break fast with the students," Siron said. "I want him to be the guardian of these children who are away from their families."

Much of the food at the iftar on September 13 was provided by the Muslim Students Association and the Pakistani Students Association, but Siron contributed large pans of kabsa (rice dishes) prepared according to her secret recipe. "It has my own twist," Siron smiled. Siron, too, wants to offer comfort to students observing Ramadan for the first time away from home.

IDENTITY AND DIVERSITY

Georgetown is the nation's oldest Catholic Jesuit university. Today, the school welcomes a religiously diverse student body and accommodates the observances of the many faiths practiced on campus, Hendi said. For example, residential dining halls open early for suhoor during Ramadan.

Lydia Habhab, 22, a student at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service, established a Ramadan routine away from her home in Dearborn, Michigan. Habhab woke up early for suhoor and stayed up until around 3 p.m. She napped until 5 p.m. and then joined a study group until the iftar. She plans to use the treadmill to fight her hunger. "Exercise will keep my endorphins up," she told USINFO.

Muslim students in America are part of a new wave of “all-Americans,” said Adnan Hassan, a senior adviser at the World Bank who attended the Georgetown iftar. According to Hendi, 90 percent of Georgetown’s Muslim students are American born and because of the lack of family influence, the observance on campus becomes more personal. (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2006&m=October&x=20061018160638bcrekaw6.905764e-02>).)

“These young students are all-American in their focus on fitness and athletics and social connections, but they are devout in their faith and responsible in their personal commitments,” Hassan said.

PART OF THE AMERICAN FABRIC

Hassan overheard a Georgetown freshman from Florida wonder whether she should support the Georgetown basketball team or the team from the University of Florida. “These students are balancing multiple identities and feeling confident,” Hassan said. “When they come to the iftar, they get comfort from like-minded people -- but at the same time, they know they are part of the larger fabric of society.”

Third-year medical resident Chadi Ibrahim said that although the fast can be physically demanding, it makes him feel vibrant and healthy, and allows him to let go of the many day-to-day anxieties that would usually preoccupy him and, instead, focus on the most important tasks.

This is how it should be, Hendi said, because the point of the monthlong fasting is to encourage Muslims to reflect on their lives and their devotion and to share the feelings of others -- what it means to be poor, to be hungry. “Ramadan is about control -- controlling one’s hunger and one’s anger,” Hendi said.

Ibrahim makes sure he does not miss the pre-fasting morning meal, even if he gets up to have only a glass of water. “I pay attention mostly to water to avoid dehydration and [I] avoid coffee as much as possible after breaking the fast,” Ibrahim said. Usually when Ibrahim wakes early for prayer, he goes back to sleep before heading to his work at the hospital. During Ramadan, however, he sometimes remains awake and finds that when he does, he is more productive.

Other students told USINFO they have a similar goal during Ramadan: To do everything better -- to be better members of the larger community and to feel better about themselves.

“If I don’t feel better about myself after Ramadan, then I’m in trouble,” said Farasi Moktader, 27, a financial analyst in Washington, who was invited to the Georgetown iftar by a former student.

Natalie Stewart, 21, who “leans toward Buddhism,” observed the Ramadan fast in support of her Muslim roommate. “Fasting can apply to many faiths -- it’s a good way to slow down the routine,” she said.

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